

Achievements and Significance of the ROK-US Defense Ministerial Meeting

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Republic of Korea (ROK) Minister of National Defense Suh Wook and United States (US) Secretary of Defense Lloyd James Austin III held the ROK-US Defense Ministerial Meeting in Seoul on March 17, 2021. This visit by Secretary Austin was the first overseas visit of a US ministerial-level official since the inauguration of the Biden administration, and the first ROK-US ministerial-level talks to be held in person. This shows the Biden administration's commitment to maintain and strengthen the ROK-US Alliance and its commitment to the defense of the ROK.

During the ROK-US Defense Ministerial Meeting—in which other key defense officials including Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Won In-choul and Commander of the USFK Robert Abrams were also present—Minister Suh and Secretary Austin discussed various alliance-related issues, such as the security situation on the Korean Peninsula and policy cooperation towards China, regional cooperation for the protection of the rule-based international community, the Conditions-Based Operational Control Transition Plan (COT-P), and the US-ROK-Japan security cooperation.

The ROK-US Defense Ministerial Meeting can be summarized in five achievements. First, the Minister and the Secretary reaffirmed the strong ROK-US Alliance and agreed to strengthen the solidarity of their military alliance. Secretary Austin

reiterated the US commitment to the defense of the ROK and its extended deterrence. Furthermore, the two sides acknowledged that the ROK-US Alliance has served as the foundation of security and economic development of the ROK for the past 70 years, and noted that the Alliance today serves as a linchpin of peace and security not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in Northeast Asia.

Second, the Minister and the Secretary reconfirmed the common goal of complete denuclearization of and permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, and agreed to continue close communication in this regard. In addition, the two sides agreed to continue diplomatic dialogue regarding policies on denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula while maintaining a strong ROK-US combined defense posture.

Third, the Minister and the Secretary reviewed the ongoing issues regarding the transition of wartime operational control. The two ministers noted that since the decision to pursue this transition in 2006, the ROK and the US have achieved great progress through combined efforts. The ROK government and the military has been making great efforts to expand the ROK military's core capabilities necessary in strengthening the Alliance and pursuing the transition. In line with the Defense Reform 2.0, the ROK-US Alliance continues to strengthen its comprehensive ability to respond to North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile threats. During the joint command post exercise (CPX) earlier in the year, a partial trial exercise was conducted in which the Future Combined Forces Command as the post-OPCON transition headquarters led, thereby further strengthening the conditions for the transition. Based on such progress, the Minister and the Secretary agreed to continue efforts for wartime OPCON transition.

Fourth, the two sides affirmed the importance of the US-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation on security in response to North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile threats and in the creation of a cooperative security framework for Northeast Asia. Regarding this, Minister Suh stated that ROK would closely cooperate for improvement of security cooperation between the three countries through measures such as high-level policy consultations at the level of the Ministry of Defense as well as each branch of the ROK Armed Forces, participation in combined training, information sharing, and human

exchanges. Secretary Austin hoped for the trilateral cooperation to move toward future-oriented relations amidst the difficulties between the ROK-Japan relations. In response to this, Minister Suh stated that apart from the historical issues between the ROK and Japan, the trilateral security cooperation will be continued, through which the ROK-Japan relations may improve.

Fifth, the Minister and the Secretary reaffirmed the importance of the joint response against a common threat such as COVID-19 and upholding the rules-based international order. The two sides agreed to further promote common values, such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, as well as future defense cooperation and mutual trust. The two sides further agreed to pursue harmonious cooperation between the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the ROK's New Southern Policy.

The day after the Defense Ministerial Meeting, the Minister and the Secretary took part in the Joint ROK-US Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting held with the ROK Minister of Foreign Affairs Chung Eui-young and the US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken. During this meeting, the two sides agreed to develop the ROK-US Alliance into a responsible alliance that is healthy, reciprocal, and comprehensive. In particular, Secretary Austin, together with Minister Suh, emphasized that they will fully support the governments' diplomatic efforts. Secretary Austin reiterated that this meeting represents the Biden administration's will to rebuild the Alliance, and signifies the importance of the ROK-US Alliance.”

Following the Joint Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting, Minister Suh and Secretary Austin took part in the floral tribute event at the Seoul National Cemetery. This floral tribute was to remember the noble sacrifices and dedication of the veterans, as well as to reaffirm the importance and value of the ROK-US Alliance that was forged in blood on the battlefield 70 years ago. Furthermore, this tribute showed the strong alliance between the two countries and was a valuable time to express the ROK-US shared aspiration for a peaceful Korean Peninsula.

The Minister and the Secretary noted that this Defense Ministerial Meeting served as an opportunity to reaffirm the firm will of the two defense Ministries to overcome

various security challenges based on the ROK-US Alliance. The two sides agreed to maintain close communication and cooperation in the future.